

Small Landowners in Alabama

By Elishia Ballentine, Editor

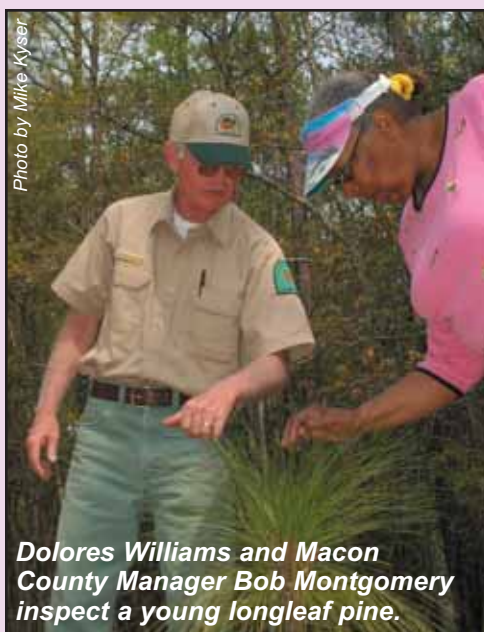
Once in a great while, you meet someone so strong and courageous, it makes you say, “I wish I could be more like that”. . . someone with a vibrant attitude about life who has overcome the odds. They make such a positive impression, that when you part company, you feel that somehow your life is better for having met them. Dolores Williams is such a person. She has an indomitable yet sweet spirit about her. She’s worked hard all her life and doesn’t have any plans of slowing down.

Born and raised in the Franklin community of Macon County, her property adjoins the land where she lived as a child. She recalls many wonderful memories from those early years in the country. She always had a love of the outdoors, and especially enjoyed learning about nature as a young girl in the Girl Scouts. Her family had the good fortune of a natural spring, and everybody in the area would come there to get water when their wells went dry. She fondly remembers that her grandfather kept a dipper hanging on a tree beside the spring, and how delicious the cool water tasted.

After finishing high school, she earned a nursing degree at Tuskegee Institute (University), married, and started a family. It was around this time in the late ‘50s that she and her husband purchased the house and land. When a divorce a few years later left her to raise three young children alone, she sometimes juggled three jobs to make ends meet. While working at the Veterans Administration Hospital, she joined the military. After ten years in the reserve forces, she went into active duty. As an Army nurse, she traveled the world and was stationed at various posts across the U.S. However, through it all, she held on to her home and property back in Alabama. Finally in 1999, after 25 years of service, she retired.

Her children, now grown and successful, live in other regions of the country, with children of their own. She has one sister that lives in Los Angeles and

another in Boston. Occasionally, these family members try to persuade her to leave the country and move near them, but she has no intention of leaving her beloved home and forest. She said that when she was in the military, no matter where she was, she always wanted to come home . . . back to Macon County. “There’s nothing like the peace and quiet of the country, and there’s no where like Alabama in the whole world.”



Dolores Williams and Macon County Manager Bob Montgomery inspect a young longleaf pine.

Ever a “hands-on” landowner, she loves getting involved in all facets of the work to be done around her place. In fact, she helped build the pond 40 years ago, operating a D7 bulldozer. (She says she can also ride a Harley and drive an 18-wheeler. And alas, it was her age – not her lack of determination – that denied her of her desire to learn to fly a helicopter!) Nowadays, she still mows her own grass, and thinks nothing of throwing her little pickup truck into four-wheel drive, taking off to the far corners of her property. She recently “rescued” and transplanted a few young longleaf pines that were inadvertently uprooted when fire lanes were installed.

Totaling approximately 70-80 acres in two different sections, she has a large stand of natural longleaf as well as an

assortment of pear and other fruit trees, pecans, and walnuts. Striving toward turning her small farm into a TREASURE Forest, she has initiated a prescribed burn program in addition to the fire lanes. The Alabama Forestry Commission’s (AFC) Macon County staff (County Manager Bob Montgomery, Forestry Specialists Jesse Fitzpatrick and Charles Baldwin) conducted a burn on her land in early spring of this year. As usual, she was right out there with them in the middle of it (as much as they allowed her to be). She laughingly says that when she started asking Bob for her own uniform and hard hat, he politely asked her to go inside out of the smoke. She states that she learns something new about forestry every time she works with the AFC crew, and she’s very appreciative of the assistance she’s received from all of the agencies. A few years back, Michele Cole (formerly with the AFC and now with the Alabama Cooperative Extension System) drew up her forest management plan, and Gwen Lewis with the Natural Resources Conservation Service directed her toward cost-share programs to help with both fire lanes and prescribed burns.

Dolores also says she’s learned a good bit about forest management since being appointed to the AFC’s Outreach Advisory Council in July of 2001. She has attended meetings and traveled around the state and Southeast, viewing forestry practices. She particularly enjoyed observing logging operations carried out with horses at St. Helena Island, South Carolina, at a meeting of the National Network of Forest Practitioners.

It’s that energetic attitude and willingness to keep learning that illustrates her heart and character. Never one to sit around with idle hands – Dolores is constantly industrious. She works outside every evening until darkness falls, then goes in the house and gets busy with needlepoint or baking. She’s always entertaining family and friends from other parts of the country, sharing her

love of the country life, making her guests comfortable almost to the point of not wanting to leave. But that probably has something to do with her Southern hospitality and home cooking. It is no surprise to learn that she still keeps in touch with the friends she made back in Basic Training.

Dolores Williams has had her share of ups and downs in life, but she never gave up. A self-proclaimed “fighter,” she firmly believes that there’s nothing she cannot accomplish, with the Good Lord’s help and guidance.

Another courageous landowner who is not afraid to take a chance is Rosalind Peoples, retired English professor. She also lives, as she put it, “not a stone’s throw” from where she was born and raised, inheriting approximately 100 acres that had been passed down through the generations. As an only child – *and* only grandchild – she spent most of her formative years in the company of adults. Fortunately for her, much of this time was spent out of doors with her father and grandfather. She was allowed to tag along where ever they went: walking in the woods, exploring the hills and valleys of the Fayette County farm, listening to their stories of hard work and sacrifice. This upbringing not only nurtured her love of the outdoors, but also gave her a connection with the land itself.

Rosalind is indeed a landowner that truly LOVES the land, feeling that the land is a part of her, and she is a part of it. After she and husband, Grady, raised three children here on the farm, she now enjoys wandering these woods and hills with her four grandchildren – the same ones she walked with *her* granddad years ago – hoping to instill a similar love of and connection to the land in them.

Because of her deep-rooted personal convictions, she shares her story with other people as well. An extremely articulate speaker, she attempts to convince them of the intrinsic value of land, relating the empowerment and freedom that land ownership can afford. Working part time with Dr. Rory Frazier at Alabama A&M, she also enjoys being active with the AFC’s Outreach Council – the goal of which is to motivate small landowners in forestry practices. Because rural folks

with small acreage cannot always afford to travel and attend big conferences, they take the programs out to them, along with 17 demonstrations sites across the state. She applauds this group which she says is full of unselfish folks, willing to share their time and knowledge with others. Rosalind herself is a prime example of this “mentoring” experience: a demonstration at the Federation of Southern Cooperatives first interested her in raising goats, and Doris Smith, another small landowner from Marengo County was her mentor in this venture.

Rosalind smiled as she related how she and her husband arrived at where they are now. About six years ago, she had just retired when shortly thereafter, the company closed where Grady had



Rosalind Peoples points out guinea eggs under the pampas grass, as husband Grady tends one of the Great Pyrenees puppies (inset).

worked for years. They found themselves at one of life’s crossroads . . . what would they do? Would he start over and look for another job? It was at that time that they decided to take a gamble. They would see if they could live off the land, the way folks used to do . . . try to make the farm be self-sustaining. It was a little scary she admits, but, “The Good Lord has a plan for all of us, and we just have to live it out.”

Nowadays, they both pour their time and love into their small farm. In addition to a variety of fruit trees on the property, they produce fresh vegetables in the garden. They raise and sell Boer goats, Cornish hens, turkey, quail, and a variety of chickens and guineas. An interesting spin-off from the goats led them into the livestock guard dog business. The couple now sells both pure-bred Great Pyrenees and Anatolian Shepherd dogs. These two breeds are relatively rare in the South-

east, so they get calls from people in several surrounding states. They also raise beagles and rat terriers. Their most recent project, which she confesses took a good deal of persuasion on her part to convince Grady to try: raising pigs.

The good news is, their enterprise is growing and they have plans to add more kennels. There are always chores to be done, fences to build. The hours are long and the work is hard, but Rosalind says they are happier than they have ever been. Highly recommending country living, she thinks she and her husband are healthier than before – they both get plenty of exercise and fresh air. Out in the countryside as they are, she says that when she gets lonely for someone to talk to, she does what’s only natural after teaching English for 26 years . . . she quotes Shakespeare to the goats and dogs!

Rosalind’s mission is to pass on her love of the land using multiple-use management, “A forest is more than just trees, it is the land itself. It offers a marketable resource to the landowner with small acreage as well as the large landowner. Additionally, as small landowners we are blessed with the availability of assistance from a number of state and federal agencies. Although it takes years to grow trees, there is a variety of other things one can do with a small forest to supplement income in the mean time, whether

it’s raising goats, poultry, rabbits, or something else. You just have to be willing to diversify.”

She went on to say, “It’s tragic that over the last 75 to 100 years, there has been a massive loss of land ownership among black landowners. Perhaps being a small landowner was historically not always a positive experience. Consequently, many sold family land and found other ways to make a living. Here in America, we take much for granted, including the opportunity to own land. That privilege is often appreciated more by people in other countries, where it may be difficult or perhaps impossible to own even an acre. I simply want folks to understand that too much time and sacrifice have been invested to allow it to slip away.”

Rosalind Peoples not only teaches this lesson, she lives it. 🌿